

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



NW Iowa Cattle Producer Follows Award-Winning Footsteps

Just like his father did more than 40 years ago, Estherville farmer Mark Guge is winning awards for his conservation efforts.

Guge (pronounced GOO-Gee) is the 2008 National Cattlemen's Association Environmental Stewardship Award winner for Region III. Guge and his father have been using conservation practices on their Estherville area farm for over 50 years and winning conservation awards since 1966.

He also promotes conservation practices and programs to others. Guge helped organize the Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing Project in cooperation with Iowa State University and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and served as project coordinator for a Leopold Center funded educational program aimed at helping cow/calf producers. He has traveled the state as a spokesperson for the cattle industry.



Mark Guge

"Fifteen years ago many farmers moldboard plowed their land," he said. "Not any more. There have been many changes as farmers adopt conservation practices like no-till. We're holding the soil in place a lot better than it used to be. We still have some problems, but not like the erosion we saw in years past."

Mark Guge is a fourth generation farmer. He farms 830 acres with his wife, Norma, and son-in-law Mark More. Their operation includes corn and soybeans, forage and pasture production for a 75-head cow/calf operation and 300-head feedlot business.

The Guges' land is rolling to hilly and varies from 2 to 12 percent slope. The soils are black, high in clay content and consist of Webster-Clarion-Nicollet soil types. Guge says they are productive soils, but they can also erode.



Mark Guge, center, stands with his son-in-law Mark More and NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Bill Fitzgerald on his Emmet County farm.

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Guge credits his father, Myron, for instilling in him a love for the land and a desire to protect it. Guge says his father started working with the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in the 1950s. He was the first in the neighborhood to use contour farming, install terraces and grassed waterways and use high-residue tillage methods to save the soil. Guge says his father also took severely sloping land out of production, seeded it into forage and made hay to feed his cattle. It was these conservation methods, Guge said, that helped his father earn the 1966 "Conservation Farm of the Year" award presented by The Sioux City Journal.

Many awards followed in later years, as did additional conservation practices.

Wayne Shafer helped Guge install conservation practices on his farm in the 1990s. Shafer was a NRCS district conservationist in the Emmet County office at that time and is now the district conservationist in Winterset.

Shafer remembers working with Mark on a pasture management system in 1991. "Mark attended a resource management conference in Albuquerque, NM. He returned with an enthusiasm of seeing his beliefs of balancing soil conservation, water quality awareness and native prairie remnant protection with the profit potential of cattle production coming together. We helped him design paddocks to better manage livestock access and forage growth patterns. Immediately there were improvements in water clarity in his

streams, the cattle paths disappeared and the stream banks revegetated. Forage stand density increased and plant vigor exploded. All of these changes related to better weaning weights and more pounds of beef produced per acre," said Shafer.

Shafer said water testing by the Iowa Lakes Community College proved his paddock system improved water clarity and turbidity.

"Water quality is important to every Iowan, but especially to the people of the Iowa Great Lakes region," said Shafer. "The Guge farm is only 12 miles from the Iowa Great Lakes. We see how the local economy depends on tourism. A big draw is the clean water within the lakes region. Stewards like Mark Guge help protect the water going into the lakes and the local jobs that depend on it."

It appears to Guge his neighbors are adopting many conservation practices he's been using for years. "In the past I'd look out and see our hills dark and our neighbor's hills yellow and eroded. There's been a change in the last decade or so because our neighbors are adopting conservation practices, too. It's good to see and it's good for the environment," said Guge.

Information on conservation practices is available at your local county NRCS office.

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